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Focus on Middle and High School Issues

Confronting Dialect Minority Issues in Special Education: Reactive and Proactive Perspectives [1]

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Abstract

The term "language minority students," traditionally applied to populations speaking languages other than English, is extended to include native English populations who speak vernacular varieties, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Like other language minority students, AAVE speakers' indigenous language systems conflict with the schools' language ideals, thus propelling disproportionate numbers of AAVE-speaking students toward special education and related services. Assumptions of language deficit, rather than difference, are likely to be supported by assessment routines that are not adequately sensitive to the regular differences between Standard English and non-Standard English. This paper describes findings and applications of ethnographic research on language in special education. Research with speech/language pathologists is developing a regionally-normed profile of AAVE for more accurate assessment. Study of classroom interaction, which determined that students use Standard and non-Standard English alternates in patterned ways, suggests that a more important issue is the infrequent opportunities for extended academic talk, the linguistic register of success at school and beyond. Teachers are being trained in interactive instructional strategies to enhance academic talk; curricular materials developed by the project recontextualize language and dialect varieties as cultural resources, rather than social problems.

Introduction

The broad goal of bilingual education is quality education for language minority students. Although the term "language minority" is traditionally applied to populations speaking languages other than English, there is good reason to apply this designation to native English populations who speak vernacular varieties of English as well, since there is a critical education and sociopolitical parallel in the conflicts that may arise between the indigenous language of the community and the mainstream language used as the medium of

instruction in schools. In the following discussion, we focus on African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the paradigm case of a dialect minority in special education.

Many of the language-related issues in educating traditionally-designated limited English proficient (LEP) students also arise in educating AAVE speakers, but with some important, subtle differences. Students who are nonnative English speakers may at least be assumed to be proficient in their mother tongue, but students who natively speak AAVE have regularly been assumed to have inherent language problems that have propelled them toward special education and related services, such as speech/language pathology (Taylor, 1986; Wolfram, 1992). Once AAVE speakers are referred for speech and language assessment, this assumption is likely to be supported by testing routines that may be more subtly deleterious for AAVE speakers than for LEP students because the differences between the Standard English of the test and the non-Standard English of the speaker are less transparent than those between English and another language, or even the interlanguage.

In this paper, we discuss issues of language in classroom interaction and in assessment for AAVE speakers. Considering those issues within the larger context of educating language minority children allows us to point out some similarities in bilingual and bidialectal situations, as well as some unique, persistent language-related challenges in providing quality education for African American children. In the process, we hope to suggest some education responses that could benefit all language minority students.

African American Students in Special Education

The fact that contrasting home/school language and cultural systems work against language minority students is starkly apparent in special education, where African Americans are significantly overrepresented. The highest rate of overrepresentation is still in the educable mentally retarded category where 41.6 percent of students are African American, although only 21.4 percent of the total school population is African American (Office for Civil Rights, 1989). This is the problem that will not go away. PL94-142, Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, legislates nondiscriminatory assessment; yet a full set of assessment procedures that are sensitive to language and cultural contrasts is not available, despite advances in this area. Without appropriate testing, children may be inappropriately placed in special education and such related services as speech/language therapy. Standardized tests that do not recognize sociolinguistic differences may penalize vernacular dialect speakers in significant ways, making them appear language disabled simply on the basis of dialect differences (Wolfram, 1976, 1983). Furthermore, a model of education achievement that does not take into account linguistic and cultural contrasts may result in significant miscalculation of students' progress. Thus, children may remain in special education throughout their schooling because annual testing and program exit criteria rely on faulty assessment.

Overrepresentation of AAVE speakers in special education is just the tip of the iceberg. Language and language use differences are an issue in mainstream instruction and learning as well since language is the critical medium for the everyday give-and-take of social interaction that constitutes classroom life.

The home/school language mismatch research, most of it on general education settings, is also relevant to special education classrooms where there is a cultural difference between students and teachers (e.g., Heath, 1983; Piestrup, 1973). This research includes both language code contrasts and language use and discourse contrasts, although we have found that they often go hand-in-hand. For example, Collins (1988) found that in reading groups, teachers often responded to AAVE speakers' problems in oral reading by targeting their dialect renderings of the Standard English text; at the same time, they responded to Standard English

speakers' problems by appealing to the meaning of the text. Michaels' (1982) study of sharing time in a racially integrated primary classroom identified two culturally-based narrative patterns in children's stories. Generally, white children told stories about a single, narrow topic, whereas black children's stories concerned broader topics and introduced branching topics. Stories with the broader, branching topics were judged by white teachers to be pointless and lacking logic. Clearly, the mismatch may affect both the structural and functional dimensions of language differences in significant ways in the instructional process.

Research on Language in Special Education

We have been investigating the ongoing social construction of disability for AAVE speaking-students in the language and culture of special education and general school settings in a large, urban school system where a substantial majority of students and teachers are African American. This research has both reactive and proactive components. We are presently working with special educators to apply our research findings to the familiar assessment problems referenced above and to instructional interaction. A complementary role in our work is more proactive: We have developed curricular materials that recontextualize language and dialect varieties as cultural resources, rather than social problems. We describe our research here, and then we show how our findings are being applied.

An Ethnographic Perspective

Because ethnographic methods are well-suited for investigating cultural patterning and social process, we have been conducting ethnography of communication research (Hymes, 1962) in special education resource (pull-out) and self-contained classrooms for students with mild and moderate learning disabilities; speech/language classes, both pull-out and plug-in; and regular education classrooms that include students who receive special education services.

In a first phase of research, we collected data in approximately twenty classrooms and other settings in five schools with predominately African American, lower SES students. Observations centered on one or two students in each class, focusing on students' social interaction with teachers and other students. In addition to field notes, our data include interviews with teachers, clinicians, psychologists, students, and administrators; audio- and videotaped recordings of naturally occurring classroom interaction; and school documents, including assessment reports and other special education documents. Tapes have been transcribed selectively, based on emerging findings from observation. Other data are being coded, sorted, and analyzed comprehensively to answer questions deriving from the project's broad research concerns with linguistic and social interaction. Case studies tell our stories about some students, with a focus on their language experiences.

Language in the Classroom

To a large extent, the conflict between competing language codes and related systems of language use in the classroom is obscured by a more fundamental socioeducation struggle over the opportunity to talk. While we uncovered evidence of sociolinguistic mismatch, the paucity of opportunities for students to talk on academic topics obscured the issue of which dialect they used. However, when students were given an opportunity to talk or interacted with each other informally in the classroom, they used AAVE predominantly.

The observed pattern of dialect distribution appeared to be sociolinguistically expectable, if at odds with prescriptive norms. Teachers rarely reacted to students' use of AAVE in instructional interchanges, although they reported in interviews that they wanted students to speak Standard English. AAVE use did not often lead to misunderstanding in most classrooms, perhaps because many teachers and students share an understanding of linguistic patterning in the speech community.

The Silent Classroom

Many observed classrooms are interactionally organized around an ideal of student silence that is evident in class rules posted in classrooms (e.g., "Raise our hands and wait if we have a question or contribution"), teachers' reliance on independent worksheets, and discourse arrangements. When students talked in silent classrooms, they were encouraged to follow the teacher-controlled three-part elicitation model—teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation (IRE) (Mehan, 1979). In fact, the student response slot could be filled by more than one student, and students could self-select to fill this discourse slot. But the teacher was always justified in invoking the strictest interpretation—that one person talks at a time, and that the teacher nominates that person. Teachers signaled that the strict interpretation of the rule was in effect by labeling students' responses "calling out," and asking to "see hands" when student talk threatened to swamp the lesson.

Silent classrooms (Goodlad, 1984) can be detrimental to educating language minority students in special education for several reasons. First, although the phenomenon is not unique to special education, it may be especially deleterious for students whose learning disabilities have been assessed or assumed to include language problems, since language development depends on practice. Furthermore, in terms of language development, the silent classroom provides little opportunity for unacclimated children, including nonmiddle-class children, to develop the academic language skills that are necessary for school success and that middle-class children learn at home (Heath, 1983). It is important to understand that the academic linguistic register is not isomorphic with dialect although it is sometimes mistakenly treated as if it were. Academic language involves using language for school linguistic functions in ways that conform to school expectations: to label and describe objects, events, and information for display purposes; to retell events in sequence; to participate socially; to request and clarify information; and to link personal experience and new ideas to school discourse (Heath, 1986).

A related danger inherent in silent classrooms concerns the relationship between language and learning. The impact of Vygotsky's theories (Vygotsky, 1978) concerning the locus of initial learning in social interaction has been especially apparent in discussions of instructional practices for children of color, which usually mention the good fit between indigenous socialization practices and interactive learning at school, such as cooperative learning structures (Trueba, 1988; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Cummins' (1989) discussion of empowering minority students calls for interactive learning arrangements to replace the traditional transmission model of direct instruction in which "the teacher initiates and controls the interaction, constantly orienting it toward the achievement of [such] instructional objectives" as drilling facts and practicing skills (p. 64). In this model the student is a passive recipient of generalized knowledge, rather than a participant in generating knowledge that is relevant to his/her developing cognition.

It is important not to equate the transmission model and the IRE structure mentioned previously. It is not the structure that disempowers students, but the way that it is used. When the IRE structure is used to generate a lesson script, essentially a lecture into which the teacher has students drop predictable answers, students are precluded from authorship and from full participation in the learning process. The following segment from a

resource class is a search for a particular response to fit a lesson script. Here, the teacher has trouble in getting the students to state the value of graphs. When students' answers do not match the one she expects, she repeats the question three times, and finally she answers it herself. (“T” is the teacher; “S” denotes students.)

1. T: Let's look at the second part of our assignment for today.
2. This week we're supposed to be reading graphs.
3. And why do you think people read graphs?
4. Why do you think people make graphs?
5. S: So they can tell how . how they goin be . or how high
6. they temperature.
7. T: Okay, they can use it for temperatures. What else.
8. S: For like a disease or sumpin'.
9. T: Okay, they can use it to track a disease. What else.
10. Well, why do you WHY do you think they put it in a form
11. like this instead of writing out all those words.
12. S: [So they can
13. S: [Don't you think you do it like you do a picture.
14. T: Give'em a picture of . of what the information is about.
15. Kevin?
16. S: (?) like who's working [an whatever.
17. S: [Like say you drew a little uh
18. T: Okay, it could be a picture showing how many people work
19. and how many don't. But why do you think they do not
20. write out all the information?
21. S: They don't um give em enough information.
22. T: No, I don't think it would be that, um, that they don't
23. give enough information. One reason, it may take too

24. long to sit down and write out all of that information

25. on a piece of paper. What else, Irvin?

26. S: Well they maybe could see see what country have the most

27. money.

28. T: Yeah, well you can do that. You can plot that on a

29. graph. But you're not ask-answering my question. I'd

30. like to know why is it that people make graphs? Why do

31. we have graphs?

32. S: Because they make it easier for everybody.

33. T: Okay, it makes it easier. And you can get, you can see

34. more information on a graph at one look than you can

35. sitting down and reading five or six pieces of paper.

This conversation is shaped to elicit the fact that the teacher states in line 33: "You can see more information on a graph at one look that you can sitting down and reading five or six pieces of paper." The first question, "Why do you think people make graphs?" (line 3) does not succeed in extracting that answer; instead the students give some examples of their experiences with graphs. The teacher focuses the question ("Why do you think they put it in a form like this instead of writing out all those words?" line 10). But the student's response that a graph gives a picture (line 13) is only half of the desired answer ("But why do you think they do not write out all the information?"). Eventually the teacher accepts the answer that "graphs make it easier" (line 32), but she adds another fact.

This student-teacher exchange shows how talk can be very narrowly constrained when it is molded around the teacher's instructional objective, rather than students' knowledge. "You're not answering my question," the teacher says (line 29). The conversational evidence suggests that the students are trying to answer her question, but not succeeding at producing what counts as an answer. This function of the IRE can scarcely be forced into a Vygotskian model of learning. Individual learning might result, but it would surely occur in fits and starts as learners listened (presumably) to interactions between the teacher and other students, just in case something relevant to their individual learning might occur.

In contrast with the transmission model of classroom discourse in which knowledge is transferred from the teacher to the students, interaction that encourages students to "become active generators of their own knowledge" is empowering (Cummins, 1989, p. 63). In the following excerpt from a conversation that recasts a potentially dangerous school event, a student's having hidden underneath a staircase, as an occasion for learning, students and teacher follow the IRE form, but the teacher asks questions and gives directions that allow the students to construct knowledge together (Barnes, 1990). “T” is the teacher; “D” is the miscreant; other students are indicated as “S.”

1. T: Do you remember where you were? Don't nod your head
2. baby, talk to me. Do you remember where you were?
3. Where were you? Don't cry. I don't want you to get
4. upset. I want to talk about it, talk about why you did
5 . it. Now, where were you sweetie?
6. D: Under the steps.
7. T: Now can I see where he is when he is under those steps?
8. Ss: No.
9. T: Could a larger child have come past and done something
10. to him? And who would have been there to help him?
11. Ss: Nobody.
12. T: Then to make matters even worse, I understand you got a
13. little tired. And what did you do?
14. S: Fall asleep.
15. T: My [D], how your voice has changed.
16. D: Huh.
17. T: And what did you do baby?
18. D: Go to sleep.
19. T: Now when you fell asleep, any one could have come. They
20. could have taken your shoes; they could have taken your
21. socks
22. S: clothes?
23. T: They could have taken his clothes. They could've done
24. bodily harm. What else could have happened under those
25. stairs.

26. S: Somebody coulda snatched him?

27. T: They could've snatched him? Come on.

28. S: The chairs could have fallen?

29. T: The chairs could have fallen.

30. D: They can't, um, wake me up.

31. T: That's right.

32. S: Somebody could have killed him?

33. T: All of those things could happen, because do we know

34. who's coming in and out of all of these doors?

35. S: There's a lot of (?)

36. T: That somebody could have come with? All kinds of

37. horrible things could have happened to you today. And

38. we would not have been there to help you.

Here, too, the teacher builds a script: In lines 1 through 21 the students supply expectable answers (i.e., T: "Now can I see where he is when he is under those steps?" [line 7]; Ss: "No." [line 8]). However, in line 19, she begins a lesson about what could have happened: "They could have taken your shoes." After a student self-selects into her paradigm ("clothes," [line 22]), she opens the floor to the students with "What else could have happened under those stairs?" (line 24). This question appears to be genuinely open: Relevant student responses are accepted and validated ("All kinds of horrible things could have happened to you today." [line 36]). The teacher is guiding the discussion but not constraining the answers.

Even if opportunities to respond were evenly distributed—which they are not since in every classroom some children rarely talk no matter how interesting the topic, and others talk frequently—the recitation model would still put heavy emphasis on listening to what others are saying. When the question allows for multiple answers and when the topic is relevant to children's lives, listening to others stimulates children to respond. But since relevance to individual learning is not guaranteed and since a competing social networks agenda is always luring the unengaged student, the facts and skills-use of the recitation model that reigns in the silent classroom does not efficiently support either learning or academic language production.

Varieties of English in Classroom Discourse

The use of Standard English and AAVE codes in the classroom touches on one of the most sensitive and controversial sociolinguistic topics in education—the role of Standard English (Wolfram, 1991). Preliminary to the question of whether Standard English should be taught, and if so, how, is an ethnographic understanding of how these codes are currently distributed in the classroom. As a starting point, then, we

attempted simply to document through many hours of observation how the codes were currently occurring in regular and special education classrooms. Not surprisingly, our observation revealed that most teachers used Standard English most of the time for instruction, and most students spoke a vernacular variety most of the time in class, regardless of their audience. However, older students, generally fourth- and fifth-graders, did shift toward the standard dialect on particular occasions: those associated with written language, and those associated with more formal classroom presentations. Because these patterns persist across many classrooms, they suggest that students who speak AAVE as a first dialect also have some productive competence in the standard dialect, including sociolinguistic knowledge concerning when to use it. Once these broad patterns of code distribution are identified through ethnographic inquiry, it becomes essential to identify the agents and/or situations that activate this shift and the linguistic features associated with it.

As has been noted (Cazden, 1988), one of the facilitating contexts for Standard English is written language, including children's writing. In an intermediate self-contained special education class, students usually replaced non-Standard features with minimal support when they had been marked in an initial written draft. Researcher probes into the nature of their Standard English competence pointed out non-Standard features in students' first drafts with something like, “See if you can make that sentence sound like ‘school language’”—a term that students understood even though the teacher did not use it. Very often (not always) students could locate nonstandard items and replace them with the standard equivalent.

A second naturally occurring context where children shifted toward Standard English was in dictating sentences for the teacher to write on the board. Discussion during a reading activity exemplifies this point. The teacher has been reading "Rumpelstiltskin" to her special education students, pausing before turning the page to ask recall and inference questions. After the main character, Rumpelstiltskin, self-destructs, she says, "And that's the end of the story"; and Antoine responds, "And nobody never saw him again." "Okay," says the teacher. Next the class constructs a story map. The teacher elicits items from the students and writes them on a large chart:

1. Teacher: Think about the setting of this story. Where did

2 . this story take place? Think about the setting of

3. the story. Where did it take place?

4. Kyle: In a forest.

5. Teacher: Uh in a for[est

6. Antoine: [In a k[ingdom.

7. Kyle: [In a c[astle.

8. Teacher: [In a ca In a k[ingdom.

9. ?: [In a

10. kingdom.

11. Teacher: Okay, you're giving me some good things, so let's

12. see if we can get it into some kind of a sentence.

13. Everything that you've given me is good, but see

14. can we get it into some kind of a sentence. Uh

15. [Antoine].

16. Antoine: The story took place

17. Teacher: takes

18. Antoine:. Takes place in the kingdom.

19. Teacher: In [a

20. ?: In [A [kingdom

21. Teacher: [kingdom, okay.

After a short nonlesson interchange, the teacher resumes:

22. Teacher: Now where, where, uh, what's the problem. Raise

23. your hand if you know. [Antoine], what do you

24. think.

25. Antoine: The problem . the problem is . that the king .

26. wants . gold.

27. Teacher: Okay.

28. Antoine: No, the problem is . that the king iss going.

29. to chop off her head.

Two typical patterns are evident in this excerpt. First, there is the shift from an utterance containing a socially stigmatized form ("And nobody never saw him again") to one avoiding stigmatized forms for dictating written language (line 25, "The problem is that the king wants gold.") When he is dictating, Antoine supplies the copula *is* which is associated with Standard English and the *-s* on the verb *want*, without prompting. The second pattern is that the teacher does not respond to the nonstandardness of the comment, "And nobody never saw him again." In fact, it is the standard construction that is repaired—where Antoine uses the standard past tense (*took*, line 16), the teacher prefers the present (*takes*, line 17); where he uses the definite *the* (line 18), the teacher and another student want him to use the indefinite *a*. The teacher evaluates appropriate answers with "Okay," whether they are expressed in non-Standard or Standard English.

AAVE speakers were observed to use Standard English in scripted presentations, whether memorized or read, but also in unplanned talk occurring in presentational occasions, such as standing up in front of the class to explain something. For instance, in demonstrating to his class how to complete an order form, a fifth-grader used Standard English; but when a classmate warned him that he was about to trip over another student, he retorted, "I ain't gon fall down. Whoever say I gon fall down, I ain't gon fall down." The presentational, demonstration language is Standard English, and the "unplanned," sociolinguistically unmarked language is the vernacular (Ochs, 1979).

Evidence of this sort suggests that the distribution of Standard English and AAVE is considerably more complicated than the simplistic dichotomy between Standard English as "school" language and AAVE as "home" language. While there is a broad-based sense in which this association holds true, it is not descriptively accurate. Standard English is the public, formal, authoritative language of presentation. Teachers and principals use it in classrooms and meetings; texts use it—books, signs, notices, and compositions. And students often use it when they perform the language functions with which it is associated. The language that students use in informal classroom discourse, however, is largely non-Standard. The classroom is a social setting where the differential power relations between teacher and student are linguistically recognized by complementarity in dialect patterning. Teachers whom we observed, black and white, rarely marked students' non-Standard English in oral interaction, unless it was found in one of the literacy or presentation contexts. We thus see that the roles of the standard and vernacular variety can become quite contextualized in a school setting, an observation that has important implications for the teaching of Standard English in the classroom.

Language in Assessment

Another set of research findings concerns the familiar problem of equitable assessment for AAVE speakers. Speech/language pathology placement rates are high in this school system, where a substantial majority of students can be presumed to speak AAVE, based on our observations and correlation between social class and language variety established in other research (Labov, 1972; Wolfram, 1969). For roughly 29.5 percent of special education students, speech/language is the primary handicapping condition (State Department of Education, 1991); whereas the incidence nationwide is 22.9 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). In students' records, predictable AAVE features, such as copula deletion and final consonant deletion, had been reported as linguistic deficit, in spite of the fact that the school system's speech/language assessment guidelines direct the clinician to use descriptive overviews of AAVE structures that some standardized testing instruments now include for reference in evaluating students' responses (e.g., CELF-R, 1987).

For more insight into how those dialectological ideals were applied by speech and language pathologists, Wolfram (1992) conducted an informal survey of the speech and language pathologists' knowledge about AAVE well-formedness. He asked clinicians to determine whether or not a set of AAVE sentences was well-formed or ill-formed in that dialect, and for ill-formed sentences, to identify the basis of their "ungrammaticality." The sentences included the typical kinds of structures that the clinicians might encounter in making judgments about the linguistic well-formedness of AAVE speakers' language, such as “The lady be here now.” (This sentence is ill-formed; *be* in AAVE is used in 'distributive/habitual' contexts only). For seven of the 10 sample structures of AAVE given in the exercise, the clinicians' judgments of well-formedness were essentially random, even though the grammatical patterns of these structures are well-attested in the descriptive literature on AAVE (Labov, 1972; Wolfram and Fasold, 1974).

The idea of this exercise was not to embarrass the clinicians, but to show that there is documentable

discrepancy in applying available descriptive knowledge about language variation to relevant vernacular linguistic structures. Furthermore such knowledge is not sociolinguistic window-dressing. It may be critical in making judgments about whether or not AAVE speakers' structures are classified as normal or disordered. For example, an AAVE speaker who reveals copula/auxiliary absence involving present tense forms of *is* or *are* (e.g. *She in the house*, *You nice*) would fall within the norms of well-formedness for AAVE copula/auxiliary use, but a speaker who reveals copula/auxiliary absence for *am* (**I here*) or for past tense forms (**Yesterday he at school*) would indicate nonnormative use of these vernacular structures. Such critical distinctions are necessary in order to avoid, at the one extreme, the false positive identification of AAVE speakers as disordered and, at the other extreme, the false negative identification of AAVE speakers who have authentic disorders in terms of indigenous dialectal norms.

Task Formatting

Beyond the familiar problem of structural differences in diagnostic linguistic forms, aspects of the testing situation itself were found to interfere in assessing lower-SES African American students. In the following example, the subject, a 10 year old African American student, was given a stimulus word and then asked to construct a sentence using the word. In the passage, “T” indicates the therapist and “S” indicates the subject.

1. T: Now I'm going to ask you to, uh, make up some sentences
2. for me and I'm going to write down exactly what you
3. say.
4. S: Yeah.
5. T: [Okay], let's practice. Let's say I'm going to ask you
6. to make up a sentence with the word "books". You might
7. say, "There are many books in this room." Right, okay,
8. I want you to try it, make up a sentence with the word
9. "shoes."
10. S: I put my shoes on.
11. T: Very good, now you don't have to use the picture to
12. make your sentence. You can if you want to, you know,
13. if you can't think of something, then just look at the
14. picture, then it can maybe help you think of something
15. to say in your sentence, as long as you have the word
16. that I say.

17. S: Yeah.

18. T: Use the word "car" in a sentence.

19. S: They drove the car.

20. T: Um huh..."gave".

21. S: Gave?

22. T: Gave.

23. S: Gave. They is—gave, they is, gave, What you [say?

24. T: [right,

25. gave.

26. S: They is gave in the kitchen.

27. T: Okay, now not "gravy", did you think I said "gravy"?

28. S: I said "gave."

29. T: Okay.

We see in this example that the subject, apparently following the paradigm of the sample item, *books* (line 5), and the first two test items, *shoes* (line 8) and *cars* (lines 15, 16), uses the stimulus item *gave* as a noun, even though (1) this syntactic formation is quite ungrammatical in her dialect and (2) the subject routinely uses *gave* as a past tense form of *give* as a part of her normal language pattern (This was confirmed by conversation following the test). Her response indicates that pattern pressure from the task frame actually outweighed her grammatical intuitions. The result was a sentence that the subject presumably would not utter during the course of ordinary speech. We conclude that this anomalous sentence arose as a by-product of the task created by the contextual frame of testing itself. Our ethnographic observation and ethnomethodological probing of responses to test items indicate that the specialized sociolinguistic context of the testing occasion needs to be understood in its own right if we are to interpret data from such occasions in a reasonable way.

Directions for Practice: A Reactive Perspective

Reacting to the situations we have described calls for some radical change in instruction and in assessment for AAVE speakers. Commitment to equitable education for language minority children means turning from a deficit-based model toward one that accommodates all language varieties; commitment to quality education means altering instruction so that it honors what children can do, including what they can do linguistically, at the same time that it supports development.

Interactive Instructional Methods

The number one language issue in instruction appears to be modifying classroom interaction to promote development in academic language proficiency—the linguistic register of classroom discourse in which speakers rely relatively less on context and more on explicit encoding to convey meanings (Cummins, 1989). Wells (1989) points out that "simply to increase the amount of talk in the classroom may not bring about a significant improvement either in language learning or in learning through language" (p. 251). It is not talk alone that is wanted, but frequent extended discourse from every student on academic topics—talk that is relevant to the lesson task at hand, contingent on immediately preceding talk, and authentically reflective of the speaker's own perspective rather than a teacher defined right answer. Providing for this kind of talk means shifting from the transmission model associated with direct instruction on decontextualized skills toward interactive instruction focused on analysis in learning activities.

A Thinking Skills Intervention

The real challenge in convincing teachers in silent classrooms, and those who aspire to silence, to begin to move toward more interactive instruction is rooted in schools' assumptions about language. Research has found that teacher talk predominates in classroom discourse (reported in Cazden, 1988). However, the teachers whom we interviewed had seldom been asked to enhance opportunities for students to use oral academic language. Their conceptualization of language has been focused on reading and writing, and on the kinds of grammar and metalinguistic skills that appear on standardized tests: classificatory tasks in grammatical identification, synonymy, and homonymy. "Oral expression" typically means vocabulary and sometimes Standard English phonology and syntax.

At the time when we began talking with teachers about creating language-rich classrooms, the schools were concerned about a new statewide criterion-referenced testing program, and a new school system language arts curriculum, both of which used cooperative learning arrangements and explicit attention to higher order thinking skills. We proposed to train teachers to use cooperative learning and a structured approach to incorporating analytic activities into lessons (McTighe and Lyman, 1988). Combined, these strategies offer opportunities for students to talk on academic topics. In summer workshops and in ongoing staff development during the school year, 25 teachers learned how to incorporate thinking skills and cooperative learning arrangements into their instruction.

Teachers implemented the intervention with various degrees of commitment and success, in terms of incorporating explicit thinking strategies into instruction and using cooperative learning arrangements to stimulate academic talk. The three most successful teachers shared several patterns. All three were already reflecting on their practice and on children's cognitive and linguistic growth before the training began; all began to analyze the oral language environments they were providing for students; and all three worked closely and reflectively with other teachers to implement the thinking skills intervention. The degree to which the other teachers succeeded in implementing the strategies related to classroom management problems, reflection on their extant pedagogical practice and confidence in their ability to modify it, and strong support from colleagues.

Asking teachers to turn from the cultural transmission model of instruction toward interactive instruction is quite audacious! We asked them to examine many of their presuppositions about effective and responsible instruction for students with learning disabilities, and about the roles and forms of language in the classroom. We asked them to risk using instructional strategies that sometimes made them feel incompetent, insecure, and exposed to peer censure. What seemed to be language rich classrooms to us were described by other teachers as noisy. The three highly successful teachers experienced thrilling, personally defined

improvements in pedagogy development in their students' academic achievement and communication.

Teaching Standard English

The patterned occurrence of Standard and non-Standard English in classroom discourse that was described above suggests that instruction in the forms of Standard English needs to be modified. We observed language arts instruction in which children applied formal, prescriptive rules of Standard English in sentence completion tasks, and in those lessons we heard teachers refer to "correct English" and "the right form." Some teachers occasionally marked highly stigmatized nonstandard features, such as *ain't* and *he gots to*. Although we did not directly observe any classroom discussion of the situations when this kind of language is used, there is evidence that it occurred when we were not there.

Since teachers have been quite surprised at the distribution of dialect patterns that we have discovered in their classrooms, we conclude that Standard English teaching is not as well tailored to its context of actual occurrence as it might be. Teachers' discussions of appropriate environments may not accord with students' implicit sociolinguistic knowledge about when Standard English is actually used in their communities. We expect to work with teachers to develop ways to make explicit these situations and to suit instruction in Standard English to the occasions in which children use it. The goal is to build on students' demonstrated sociolinguistic awareness and capacity for producing situationally appropriate speech, and not to replace AAVE in the domains where it is implicitly considered appropriate in school and outside. It will be important to investigate students' linguistic competence in both dialects in each classroom.

It should be noted that our findings about the contextualization of Standard English usage in the classroom do not necessarily match findings in other research studies. For example, sociolinguistic research in regular education classrooms of another urban school system not far from the one where we are working found that fourth- and fifth-grade AAVE speakers did not use nonstandard dialect with teachers (Lucas and Borders, 1987). At this point, it is difficult to determine if the difference in findings is a product of different community settings or different education, sociolinguistic distribution patterns. It might also be due to a difference in the research methodology. The basis for such observed differences certainly needs to be resolved, but we stand firmly by our observations about the dialect distributional patterns found in our study.

A New Assessment Paradigm

The currently accepted model in communication disorders holds that language norms are ultimately to be defined on the basis of a client's local speech community (ASHA, 1983). Although this perspective is relatively straightforward, it is not without significant implications for assessment. First, baseline descriptive knowledge of relevant dialectal structures for a given speech community is required. Descriptive accounts of vernacular varieties cannot be confined to those now being offered with some language assessment instruments: they must include unique lectal variation within the client's community since dialect variation is a dynamic phenomenon not confined to static descriptive accounts. While imposing prescriptive language standards leads to falsely attributing a dialect difference to disorder, imposing lax standards not in compliance with local norms may lead to the assignment of false credit for structures that may be ill-formed in terms of the vernacular dialect itself.

The real challenge does not simply involve applying a vernacular dialect profile; instead, it involves the development of an analytical framework that allows clinicians themselves to make patterned observations about language variation. The skill required to collect an appropriate language sample and make

observations about language patterning can be applied to patterning in local language variation as well as to patterning in communication disorders (Wolfram and Christian, 1989).

In our current research, several unique local dialect structures have been uncovered by a group of speech and language pathologists with whom we have been conducting collaborative research. Initial observations about structures were made by the clinicians themselves, who then collected data to confirm or disconfirm various hypotheses about the linguistic patterning or sociolinguistic distribution of items.

One phonological pattern initially observed by the clinicians involves a fronting and centralization of open *o* in items like *dog*. The pronunciation of *dog* is shifting toward a phonetic merger with the vowel in the name *Doug*. Various hypotheses about the phonological patterning of the 'near merger' were offered, and data were collected by a subgroup of clinicians to confirm that, in fact, this phonetic shift was restricted to an environment preceding voiced velar segments (that is, items such as *dog, fog, frog, log*, etc. show this shift, but not *walk, talk, long, wrong,* and so on.). Furthermore, the phonological pattern was found to have a strong ethnic and age correlate in this setting (It was primarily found among younger African American speakers).

The position that language norms are to be defined on the basis of the local speech community also requires attention to the details of patterned language variation. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of sociolinguistic studies over the past several decades is the observation that varieties of language are sometimes differentiated not by the categorical use or nonuse of forms, but by the relative frequency with which different variants of a language form may occur (Labov, 1966; Wolfram, 1969; Trudgill, 1974). For example, in a classic case of fluctuation, [I_] and [In] variation in the unstressed syllables of items like swimming or fixing, virtually all groups of English speakers vary between the two forms, but social groups of speakers are differentiated by their relative use of the variants. An early study of four social classes of Detroit, Michigan, speakers found that upper-middle-class speakers used *in'* forms in approximately 20 percent of all cases where they might have used it (that is, unstressed syllables), lower-middle-class in 40 percent, upper-working class in 50 percent, and lower working class in 80 percent, of these potential contexts (Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley, 1967). While such variability is inherent within the system of an individual speaker, the relative frequency of items is systematically constrained—in this case, primarily by social constraints.

Independent linguistic factors, usually involving structural environment and composition, also constrain the frequency with which variants are produced. For example, there is variability in word-final consonant cluster reduction in English, where final stop clusters are paired in voicing (that is, both members of the cluster are either voiced or voiceless such as *mist* or *cold* vís-a-vís *colt* or *runt*, that are not paired for voicing). Consonant cluster reduction occurs more frequently before a following consonant (i.e., the /t/ is deleted more frequently in “The mist blurred the view” than in “There's mist in the valley”) and with the monomorphemic form (*mist* versus the bimorphemic form *missed*).

An understanding of systematic variation impacts the interpretation of normative variable behavior. Consider, for example, a case in which an understanding of variable behavior is critical to the accurate assessment of variable plural suffix absence. Plural suffix absence is fairly general in AAVE, but it is an inherently variable phenomenon (Wolfram, 1969; Labov, 1972). The range of plural absence in this dialect typically involves between 10 and 33 percent of the cases where a plural might potentially be absent (Labov, 1972; Wolfram, 1969).

Now consider the case of -Z plural absence as represented in the closure portion of the CELF-R (1987) that

includes three tokens of regular plural suffixation. The actual items from the test are given below. The response considered "correct" according to the standardized instructions is given in parentheses, and possible vernacular dialect responses based on a nonvariation model are given in the underlined portion of the item reserved for recording client responses.

1. Here is one dog. Here are two **dog** . (dogs) (If the student says *puppies*, indicate this and mark the item as correct.)

2. Here is one cat. Here are two **cat** . (cats) (If the student says *kittens*, indicate this and mark the item as correct.)

3. Here is one watch. Here are two **watch** . (watches)

Our understanding of the normal variable nature of plural -Z absence for an AAVE speaker gives us a basis for interpreting the variable responses. For example, the absence of one of the three tokens of plural -Z suffix might fall within the limits of normalcy for an AAVE speaker (since normal rates of -Z absence range from 10 to 33 percent), but the absence of all three instances, or even two absent cases, would not match the normal range of variable -Z absence for this variety. The interpreter of these responses risks a false positive identification of a speaker if some incidence of -Z absence in the indigenous vernacular is not accommodated. At the same time, the interpreter runs the risk of a false negative interpretation if dialect credit is given for all three instances of plural -Z absence since -Z absence is not categorical in the dialect. Variable linguistic phenomena both differentiate and characterize various varieties of a language, and these dimensions cannot be ignored in interpreting inherently variable linguistic data.

Changing the assessment paradigm is like changing the transmission model of instruction, in terms of the need to examine presuppositions and the need to change prevailing attitudes. At the same time, it calls for a new level of sociolinguistic knowledge and detail on the part of the practitioner. But commitment to equity requires that these changes begin, nonetheless. The speech/language pathologists research group with which we have been working is presently considering ways to apply knowledge from variation research in expanding the assessment protocol, and to provide in-service training for clinicians who need access to such a perspective.

Directions for Practice: A Proactive Perspective

The issue of education equity is tied in with a general need for accurate information about language differences. Equity concerns are not limited to how educators and professional specialists categorize students, based on language differences. They extend to how students feel about other students and themselves. Students who speak socially favored language varieties may view their dialectally-different peers as linguistically deficient. Worse yet, speakers of socially disfavored varieties may come to accept this viewpoint about their own variety of language. Students need to understand the natural sociolinguistic principles that lead to the development and maintenance of language varieties, apart from their relative social status. In this section, we argue for a proactive approach to promoting students' awareness of language and dialects, and we propose a curriculum for students that directly introduces them to fundamental notions of language diversity. We describe curricular materials on dialects of American English that we have developed in line with this objective.

Language Awareness

Why should students be introduced to the study of language differences when they already engage in language arts or English language study at practically every grade level? There are several reasons for suggesting that there is a critical need for a unit of study on language differences. First, there is an education tolerance of misinformation and folklore about language differences that is matched in few subject areas, particularly with respect to the nature of standard and vernacular varieties (Wolfram, 1991). And the factual misinformation is not all innocent folklore. At the very least, the education system should assume responsibility for replacing the mythology about language differences with factual information.

Second, since the study of language has been reduced to laborious, taxonomic exercises such as "parts of speech" identification and other metalinguistic exercises of questionable value, it is important to introduce the study of language differences as a fascinating window through which the dynamic nature of language patterning can be viewed.

Finally, there is a practical reason for studying about language differences. As students learn in a nonthreatening context to pay attention to details of language variation, they should become more equipped to transfer these skills to other language-related tasks, including the acquisition of a standard variety.

A Dialect Curriculum

Wolfram, Detwyler, and Adger (1992) have been experimenting with a curriculum on language variation for fourth and fifth grade students that addresses humanistic, scientific, and cultural objectives. On a humanistic level, the objective is to introduce students to elementary notions of language variation that contrast with some of the typical prejudices and stereotypes associated with dialect differentiation in popular culture. Through selected excerpts from a popular video, *American Tongues* (1986), students are inductively introduced to the naturalness of culturally-based and regionally-based linguistic diversity. These natural samples of linguistic diversity are then contrasted with a set of excerpts (from real life interviews about language attitudes) in which people resort to unjustified stereotypes in describing other people's speech.

Although much of the presentation about dialect diversity is quite inductive, it is clear that the students understood that it is natural and normal for people to speak different dialects and that many popular attitudes and stereotypes about dialect differences are unjustified. This is an initial step in promoting the truth about dialects, but, unfortunately, it is a necessary starting point.

Another goal of the curriculum is scientific: the students examine patterns of language variation as a kind of scientific inquiry. Dialect differences can provide a natural laboratory for making generalizations from carefully described sets of data. Consider one example of a student exercise on the merger of the [I]/[E] contrast before nasal segments, as this process operates in Southern varieties of English. First the students are presented data indicating where the merger takes place, followed by another set of data showing where the merger does not take place. Students are then asked to formulate a hypothesis that specifies the phonological environment triggering the merger. Finally, they are asked to predict where the merger does and does not occur for a new set of data.

A Southern Vowel Pronunciation

In some Southern dialects of English, words like *pin* and *pen* are pronounced the same. Usually, both words are pronounced as *pin*. This pattern of pronunciation is also found in other words. List A has words where

the ***i*** and ***e*** are pronounced the same in these dialects.

List A:* I *and* E *Pronounced the Same

1. tin and ten
2. kin and Ken
3. Lin and Len
4. Windy and Wendy
5. sinned and send

Although *i* and *e* words in List A are pronounced the same, there are other words where *i* and *e* are pronounced differently. List B has word pairs where the vowels are pronounced differently.

List B:* I *and* E *Pronounced Differently

1. lit and let
2. pick and peck
3. pig and peg
4. rip and rep
5. litter and letter

Compare the word pairs in List A with the word pairs in List B. Is there a pattern that can explain why the words in List A are pronounced the same and why the words in List B are pronounced differently? To answer this question, you have to look at the sounds that are next to the vowels. Look at the sounds that come after the vowel. What sound is found next to the vowel in all of the examples given in List A?

Use your knowledge of the pronunciation pattern to pick the word pairs in List C that are pronounced the same (S) and those that are pronounced differently (D) in this Southern dialect.

List C: Same or Different?

__ 1. bit and bet

__ 2. pit and pet

__ 3. bin and Ben

__ 4. Nick and neck

__ 5. din and den

How can you tell where ***i*** and ***e*** will be pronounced the same and where they will be pronounced

differently?

Exercises of this type require students to examine data depicting regional and ethnic language variation, to formulate hypotheses about systematic language patterning, and then to confirm or reject hypotheses about the patterning. Simultaneously, and inductively, students learn about the applicability of the scientific method in the study of language as they understand the regular, predictable nature of language variation. As a by-product of this type of inquiry, we have found that students and teachers begin to develop a makpatronizing respect for the intricacy of language patterning in dialects (including other people's and their own dialects) regardless of the social status of the respective varieties.

A third major goal of the curriculum is cultural-historical. Students are introduced to the historical development of AAVE from its presumed Creole roots through concrete, participatory activities as well as historical exposition. In one group activity, students make up a skit simulating language contact between groups that speak unintelligible languages. In this way, they inductively learn to appreciate the circumstances that give rise to language pidginization. Following the skit, they view a video segment profiling the development, distribution, and migration of Pidgins and Creoles in the African Diaspora to see the historical continuity between AAVE (assumed to be a decreolized variety), Caribbean, and West African-based Creoles. Through this process, students gain an appreciation for the roots of different sociolinguistic groups, replacing myths about language change and development with authentic sociohistorical information. This type of education in language diversity serves to connect minority students with their own sociolinguistic heritage in a positive, empowering way (Cummins, 1989).

Conclusion

The fact that disproportionate numbers of AAVE speakers end up in special education programs points to the critical need to examine language issues as they impact vernacular dialect speakers. It is quite clear that the language issues involved in educating African American children who speak AAVE cannot be resolved with a simple, monodimensional approach to language differences; the complexity of the issues cries out for a multifaceted approach that considers both broad-based sociocultural and fine-tuned sociolinguistic details related to the role of language in education. A valid model needs to accommodate the dialect and utilize it as a resource at the same time that it focuses on expanding the academic language skills that are the vehicle to exit from special programs, succeed in school, and access mainstream social activities. While some of these issues seem quite similar to those involving languages other than English, there are other dimensions that position dialect minorities uniquely in their sociolinguistic and socioeducation context.

Although we have focused on some of the concerns of special education here, it is readily apparent that these issues are equally pressing for regular education. If, in fact, one of the primary roles of education is to replace misinformation and ignorance with reliable information and considered reflection, then this charge extends across all education settings; and it extends to all children, language minority and language majority alike.

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Notes

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